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Know Thine Enemies

It was a coincidence that on the day of the assassination of President Sadat the news leaked that a pending presidential order in the U.S. would place fewer restrictions on CIA infiltration of domestic groups than an earlier draft shelved last March after a storm of protest. But the events in Egypt ought nonetheless to give a special weight to the concern that our domestic flank may be insufficiently guarded.

Consider, for a moment, the fact that Anwar El-Sadat might be alive today had he possessed better intelligence in his own country, able to keep him informed in greater detail of the plots that were inevitably seething within and without his army. Consider, too, the fact that—while we don't know at the moment precisely which of Sadat's enemies masterminded the attack that claimed his life—the enemies of President Sadat undoubtedly were, and are, enemies of our own leaders.

Thus it strikes us that, since the Central Intelligence Agency has a key charter in gathering information on such characters overseas it would be logical to allow the same agency to pursue some of its leads at home, as it sees fit. We don't know just what those leads might be at the moment. But common sense tells us that if a kid like John Hinckley could, presumably acting alone, put a bullet within inches of President Reagan's heart, then a ring of fanatics, well-financed and armed by a determined enemy, could handily wreak the sort of havoc here that was visited on Egypt Tuesday.

According to the Associated Press, the proposed rules that stirred up all the protest in March would have allowed the CIA to infiltrate a domestic organization only if the action were "strictly limited in its nature, scope and duration to a lawful purpose related to foreign intelligence" and would be allowed to influence an organization's activities only if the group were ruled or controlled by "foreign nationals . . . a foreign organization or government or is working for or on behalf of a foreign organization or government." The newly proposed rules would drop those restrictions, the AP reported Tuesday.

Predictably, these changes are being loudly criticized by civil libertarians and some members of Congress. Congressman Don Edwards of California, for example, is quoted that the draft would "put the CIA back in the business of domestic spying" and shows that the Reagan administration "has once again demonstrated its callous disregard for the Constitution." Senator Leahy of Vermont is saying the administration doesn't "understand the seriousness" of what it's doing.

By our lights, the seriousness that must be grasped here is the seriousness of the Soviet-backed campaign of terror and destabilization that is under way across the globe today. It strikes us that in word and deed the Reagan administration has given ample indication that it appreciates the potential for abuses of civil rights, and intends to guard against them. Now is a time for maximum diligence, lest the sort of crime perpetrated against Mr. Sadat be committed here at home.

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